DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 287 571 PS 016 876

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TITLE Today's Child at School: A Parent's Guide.
INSTITUTION Primary English Teaching Association, Rozelle (Australia).
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Objectives; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Curriculum; Foreign Countries; *Home Study; *Institutional Characteristics; *Parent Role; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Australia (New South Wales); Parents as Teachers

ABSTRACT

This guide, which is intended for parents in New South Wales, Australia, provides a description of primary school and its curriculum and guidelines for conducting learning activities with children both at school and at home. Introductory sections briefly discuss the topics of parents as children's first teachers, knowledge about children's development, facts about learning, and the goals of the children's schools. Subsequent sections describe the curriculum in general and in particular, focusing on talking and listening, writing, reading, spelling, mathematics, social studies, science, arts and crafts, music, and health and physical education. Included in each section are guidelines suggesting ways parents can provide experiences likely to further their children's academic achievement. The concluding section answers questions parents often ask about homework, testing, teaching methods, student placement, and instruction in English grammar. (RH)

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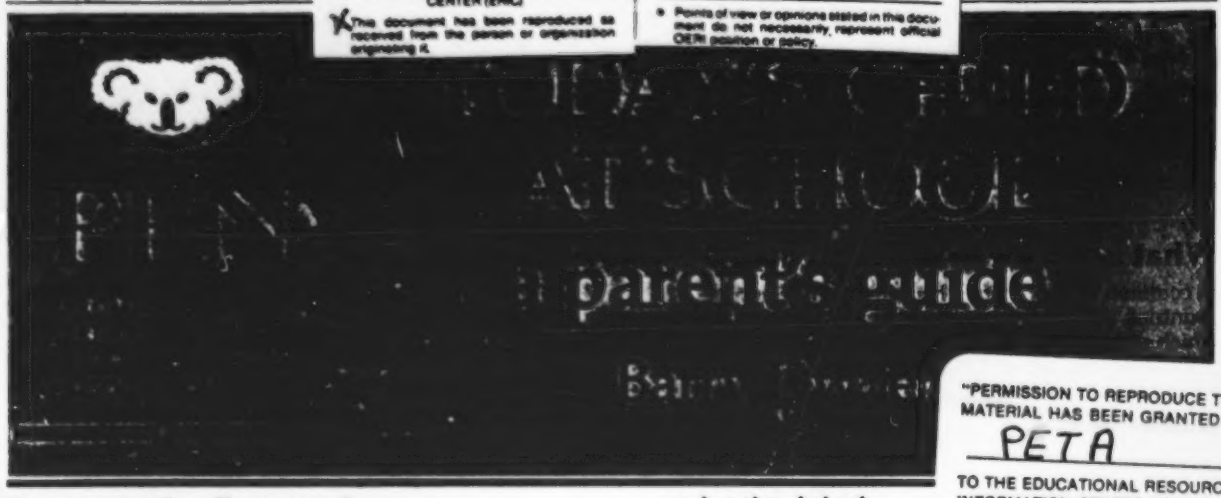

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Parents—the first teachers

Parents are the child's first teachers—and the most important ones.

In those few years before school begins, tremendous learning and growth occurs at home: language is acquired along with a variety of other basic skills in relating to people and in coping with the world generally.

Every child enters school on the very first day with attitudes to self and to learning that will at least partly determine the success or otherwise of future classroom programs.

Parents, then, are vitally significant. They provide the foundations on which other teachers build. And their importance continues right through the school years.

What do we know about children?

Before teachers plan ways of helping their pupils to learn things that are worth knowing, they have to look carefully at the children themselves. School programs will only work if they are respectful of children and build on what we know about childhood.

Parents and teachers, who are great observers, share a basic understanding that:

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- Every person is a unique individual, growing at his or her own rate, possessing special skills and interests, having a personal style of doing things, having to cope with certain weaknesses.
- Because children develop at different rates, they are not all ready to learn the same things at the same time. Sometimes the best response that caring adults can make to this is to *wait*.
- We all need to feel good about ourselves and experience plenty of success if we are to be confident in tackling new tasks.
- Both imaginative play and talk are vitally important for young children. They are tools of learning.

What do we know about learning?

Since schools exist to help children learn, it is important for us all to be aware of the conditions under which effective learning is most likely to occur. Again, the experiences of observant parents support those of observant teachers, who know that children are most likely to learn:

- when they really want to know something
- when they feel safe
- when they feel confident because they have experienced success
- when they are mature enough to master the task
- when the task is interesting and makes sense
- when they are challenged
- when they can observe others and learn by imitating them
- when they have room to move, to try new ideas, to make mistakes
- when they are active and involved—making discoveries, solving problems, explaining to others what they are doing
- when practising
- when their parents and teachers expect them to succeed.

What do primary schools try to do?

Today's primary school sees itself as working in partnership with parents in helping children to grow towards happy and useful adulthood.

In trying to do this, it provides:

- a stimulating environment which excites curiosity and challenges children to learn
- a welcoming and caring community where children can learn with and from people of different ages
- learning experiences that cater for children at whatever stage of development they might be
- teachers who know that they teach values and attitudes as well as develop skills and provide knowledge.

Amongst the most important tasks of the primary school is helping children *to learn how to learn*.

Through a sound primary program, a youngster learns how to sort the relevant from the irrelevant, to shape ideas and test hunches, to make inquiries, to solve problems, to reflect, to make sense of experiences and to communicate thoughts and feelings.

Because of all this, the modern primary school has certain observable features. It cultivates a warm, co-operative, family-type atmosphere; its informal methods emphasize hands-on, practical experiences; play and activity are far more obvious than passive listening or regimented movement through inflexible routines; the stress is on individual-pupil learning rather than whole-class instruction.

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What is taught in today's school?

In common with primary schools in many other countries, the Australian school has a curriculum through which children learn

- to talk, listen, read and write efficiently
- to master mathematical ideas and skills
- to appreciate their heritage and the natural world they live in
- to express themselves through drama, art and music
- to be physically fit and to understand some important things about good health.

The traditional way of organising such learning was by separating activities into different subjects, but in recent years many teachers have moved towards what they call 'learning across the curriculum'.

They see the skills of investigating, problem-solving, communicating and self-expression as being at the heart of the learning program and say that these skills are being developed all the time in good learning activities. For example, a class unit on 'The Local Area' will have children gathering information in interviews, writing reports, reading references, designing graphs and doing calculations, preparing murals, and a variety of other things that give learning a certain unity and cut across the old subjects.

While the curriculum should be seen as a whole, and while we should be aware that learning does not fall into neat, self-contained packages, it is none the less useful to look at the different areas separately.

Underlying all of this is the important fact that the school's program is most likely to be successful when it builds on and is supported by home experiences. The most effective curriculum is the one in which parents and teachers work together as partners.

TALKING AND LISTENING

At School

Today, more than ever before, teachers are aware of the importance of language in learning — particularly the elements of talking and listening.

For this reason, group work is a major feature of the modern classroom. Children are encouraged to plan together, to discuss learning problems, to explain something that is happening, to express a point of view or to persuade others.

The teacher will provide opportunities for the children to examine the appropriateness of certain types of language in different situations. They may practise talking in groups of different sizes and to children of different ages; they may learn through experience the difference between formal and informal talk and the various conventions that are appropriate.

In all of this, the children are encouraged to express themselves clearly and with confidence. And the teachers themselves are talking less!

At Home

- Accept the basic truth that language is at the heart of learning and that children become competent in language if they are encouraged to use it by caring adults who share good times with them.
- Encourage your children to talk about experiences they have had during the day. Express interest, ask questions, share stories of your own experiences.
- Show them how to use language appropriate to
  - answering a telephone
  - greeting adults
  - introducing a friend
  - delivering a message
  - giving a compliment
  - expressing thanks
  - making a purchase.
- Regularly tell stories and jokes, and encourage your children to do the same.
- Be prepared to set aside *time*, when both you and the children are relaxed, for just talking together.

WRITING

At School

Writing (that is, composing ideas and putting them down on paper) is seen as a very basic school activity. It is an aid not only to communication but to learning itself. Accordingly teachers encourage children to write about experiences and ideas as often as possible — *daily* writing is the ideal!

Writing is taught as a *'process'* that may involve talking and discussing as well as jotting down notes and writing out 'rough drafts'. Frequently an early draft is 'polished' — that is, prepared for an audience. Once the work has been given this special attention, it is ready to be 'published'.

Teachers make a special point of talking to children about their writing. In these brief discussions, called 'conferences', they offer encouragement and ask questions that help the young writers think more deeply about their work.

Neat handwriting and correct spelling, punctuation and grammar are important aids to the clear expression of ideas. They are attended to in the later stages of composing and are generally not taught in lessons separated from the act of writing itself.

Many teachers prefer to help children with these mechanical aspects of writing during the conferences they have with them, rather than by taking work away and marking the errors in red. The relentless correction of mistakes can destroy the interest and confidence of child-writers and does not help improve the quality of their work.

Children are generally encouraged to select their own topics, so that a visitor will often find children in the one class writing about many different things during a writing lesson.

At Home

- Let the children see you write — letters, shopping lists, short messages and so on. If they never see people write at home, children can get the message that writing only happens at school.

- Encourage them to write — letters to friends and relatives, thank-you notes, get-well messages . . .
- Have writing displayed in the home — reminders ('Don't forget it's Mum's birthday tomorrow!'), lists of things to do, messages of congratulation, postcards from friends on holiday. Have a kitchen noticeboard or some attractive magnets on the fridge door.
- Provide a quiet place where your children can write.
- Give them presents associated with writing — different types of pens and pencils, paper of different shapes and colours, a desk lamp, a diary, a dictionary, erasers, a bottle of 'white-out'.
- Encourage the habit of diary-keeping, remembering to respect the privacy of the writer.
- Be an interested listener and reader. Talk over ideas for writing, encourage the reading aloud of early drafts, read the finished product with enthusiasm.
- Praise writing done at school. Pay more attention to what the children are writing about than to the spelling and punctuation.
- Show them how to write to commercial firms and government departments for information, and how to write polite letters of complaint or support to TV channels, newspapers and other organisations.

READING

At School

Teachers know that children's ability to read begins in the language experiences they have had at home.

Children who have been surrounded from their earliest years with stimulating and reassuring family talk, and who have developed a real 'feel' for books and stories because they have been read to regularly, have already taken the first and most important steps in learning to read.

Teachers build on these early experiences. They show the children how to make sense of the printed word by recalling and applying their own knowledge of real-life events, of how language flows and of the shapes and 'sounds' of words and letters.

Stress is always on finding *meaning* in the print. This, after all, is what reading is all about.

Teachers know that the more children love and read stories, the better readers they will become. So in the modern classroom the children are read to a great deal. They are also given plenty of time to read themselves and enjoy many of the delightful children's books that are now available.

In the early stages of learning to read, teachers often write down the little stories and comments made by the children and use this child-language as basic material for their reading program.

They know that children are individuals who learn in slightly different ways and at different rates. So they try to relate their teaching to each child's particular interests, abilities and language background.

At Home

- Read to your children as often as you can. This is one of the best ways of developing lifelong positive attitudes to reading and an understanding of print and books.
- Encourage beginning readers to 'read' signs, posters, etc. At this early stage explain how print works by pointing to words as you read them aloud, showing the left-to-right movement, the purpose of illustrations, the progression page by page, the cover and title — all in a happy, playful way.
- Praise every effort in reading, especially if confidence is low. Don't compare a child's performance with that of relatives or friends.
- Establish a routine of taking the children to the local library. Help in selecting books but resist the temptation to impose your own choices. When you get home, don't switch on the TV but have an evening of family reading.
- Give books as presents and show the children how to care for them.
- Have a bookshelf or small bookcase in the children's bedroom so that books, especially favourites, are readily available.
- Buy bedlamps and encourage the routine of reading in bed before lights out.
- Encourage the children to make good use of the school library. Ask: 'What have you borrowed this week? Is it interesting? Would you like to read a bit to me? Would you like to read the whole book to me, a chapter a night?'

SPELLING

At School

In mastering the conventions of spelling, as in all other areas of learning, children display different abilities and progress at different rates. If they see themselves as bad spellers because they always have lots of errors marked out in red, or because they consistently score poorly in tests, they are less likely to become confident achievers.

Because they are well aware of this, today's teachers are moving away from weekly spelling lists consisting of the same words for every child, and from relentless crossing out of every error.

At the same time, they are more convinced than ever of the importance of good spelling. But the emphasis is now on learning-how-to-spell, which is not the same thing as learning set lists 'off by heart'.

Spelling should serve writing — knowing words for their own sake has no real purpose. So children are taught ways of improving their spelling in the context of their own writing. Word lists are kept and learned, but the words are the ones the children actually use. Most of them, therefore, belong to a personal list gradually built up by the child-writer.

Great stress is placed on the proofreading skills required when children read over their own work with an eye to detecting possible errors, which can then be checked by using a dictionary or other reference.

A technique whereby children in the early stages of schooling are encouraged to 'invent' their own spelling as the first step to spelling mastery has proved very successful. Further details of this are given on p. 6.

At Home

- Try to build up the self-confidence of your young speller. Praise effort even if the result is not quite correct. Too much criticism and too much attention to errors result in children avoiding the use of interesting but more difficult words in their writing.

- Remember that teachers do not insist on correct spelling in a first draft. Here the child needs maximum freedom to search for new ideas and to find interesting ways of expressing them.
- Encourage your children to read over their written work looking for possible errors that can be checked by using a dictionary or word collection.
- Encourage reading. After a comprehensive review of available evidence, one researcher reports: 'To increase the amount and range of a pupil's reading, that is to increase his visual experience of words, is probably *the best single method* of improving his spelling.'
- Show the children how to use this simple technique of learning new words:

  (1) LOOK at the word and say it softly

  (2) COVER the word and try to 'see' it in the mind

  (3) WRITE it from memory

  (4) CHECK . . . and repeat for as long as necessary.

MATHEMATICS

At School

The three major areas covered in primary mathematics are Number, Measurement and Spatial Relations.

Under Number, the children learn how our number system works, how to solve some everyday problems using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, and what fractions, decimals and percentages are. As part of this learning, they develop skill in the automatic recall of number facts which can, for convenience, be arranged in the form of 'tables'.

They also learn techniques for measuring length, time, capacity, weight, area, temperature, volume and angles, and how these different measures relate to each other.

In the study of Spatial Relations, they learn about common flat shapes and solids. This involves them in drawing, cutting out, folding and colouring, and in making simple plans, maps and models.

As with the other parts of the curriculum, the emphasis is on *problem-solving and understanding*. This is at the core of real mathematics and takes precedence over mere speed of calculation. If a child doesn't understand the appropriateness of a particular calculation, using a calculator to get the answer quickly doesn't make any contribution to genuine learning. But once a child knows what he or she is trying to do, the calculator has its place.

In good mathematics teaching, then, you will see:

- the teacher explaining and demonstrating
- a great deal of discussion between teacher and pupils and amongst the pupils themselves
- much hands-on practical work, problem-solving and inquiries into real-life situations
- regular practice of fundamental skills and routines.

At Home

- Remember that you have a major influence on your children's attitude to mathematics. Comments such as 'No one in this family is much good at Maths.' or 'Well, you're a girl and they're better at English,' set up tremendous barriers to learning.
- Encourage your children to make use of maths in everyday family activities: weighing and measuring, shopping, playing games which involve keeping scores, calculating journey times, and so on.
- Encourage hobbies that require measuring and the use of shapes — model-making, for instance.
- When helping with mathematical problems, demonstrate where possible by using solid objects — buttons, sticks, pieces of string and the like. It is much easier to understand fractions, for example, if the concept is developed with pieces of paper which can be folded or torn and compared before the child starts manipulating figures.
- Again, when helping, show the importance of *estimating* — that is, coming up with a 'rough answer' before doing the actual calculation. This ability so see the 'reasonableness' of an answer is one that has to be developed and is particularly relevant when a calculator is used.

SOCIAL STUDIES

At School

The basic skill developed in Social Studies is *inquiry*.

In making their inquiries into people and groups and the environment, children learn to recognise and define problems, to make observations, to organise information, to draw conclusions, and to develop a variety of other thinking skills.

The actual Social Studies program is generally organised around units or topics or themes. In each of these the children are led to identify and investigate key questions and problems. They might include, for instance, problems of racial, ethnic, social and cultural differences. Or they might focus on human needs or the needs of the environment.

At Home

- Encourage your children's natural curiosity about the world around them. What are the similarities and differences amongst groups of people? What are some of the hardships faced by people in our own society and in other countries? In what ways do we all depend on each other?
- Foster such attitudes as tolerance, co-operation, open-mindedness, and compassion in discussing different social issues within the family.
- Watch and discuss suitable TV programs that examine significant social issues.
- Encourage the children to think, at their own level, about *why* things are the way they are and *how* we might all help to make a better world.

SCIENCE

At School

The core of Science, as of Social Studies, is inquiry. The children are led to observe the physical world around them, to pose problems, to make investigations, to draw conclusions and to communicate their findings.

This is not a study where children are provided with information which they then learn in preparation for a test or exam. Rather, it involves them in observing and handling physical objects and living things.

While some investigations are made within the classroom, others are done within the school playground or away from school — in a park, at a rock pool, in an area of bushland.

At Home

- Encourage your children's natural curiosity about how things work and why things happen. Help them to find out rather than providing instant answers.
- Give them experience in:
  - establishing and looking after a small garden
  - caring for pets/maintaining an aquarium
  - helping with simple cooking.
- Give presents that develop an interest in Science — a simple microscope, a telescope, a science kit, a camera, models, etc.
- Find interesting and well-illustrated books on science-related topics.
- Take the family to the museum, zoo, national parks, observatories, science exhibits and other places that will stimulate interest.
- Watch TV nature programs with your children.

ART/CRAFT

At School

Today, the basic truth that children are by nature artists and makers is generally accepted. Their natural abilities flourish when they are given the opportunity to take part in creative activities.

Again, such concepts as problem-solving and discovery apply to this part of the curriculum.

Children learn the techniques of composition, design and construction in artwork, along with skills involved in such activities as weaving, sewing, clay-modelling, block-cutting and wood-carving.

In all of this they are being helped to think imaginatively, to make judgements, and to express and communicate ideas and feelings — in short, to understand better both themselves and their world.

At Home

- Help your children to become aware of the natural beauty around them — different colours and patterns, the different feel of various objects, unusual sounds and smells.
- Tolerate a certain amount of messiness as the children paint and make things with paper, cardboard, sticks, paste, buttons, needle and thread, seeds, foil and odd pieces of discarded material.
- Express interest and even delight in 'creations'. Don't let the children lose confidence in themselves as artists/makers. Remember that the experience itself is important for the child, irrespective of the 'quality' of the finished product.

MUSIC

At School

First and foremost, teachers want children to enjoy music — to enjoy listening to it and making it, as well as being involved in various musical activities.

A balanced music program has three elements:

1. *Listening* in ways that develop awareness and genuine appreciation.
2. *Performing* through singing, playing and moving.
3. *Organising sound* and the making of music by the children themselves.

Through a wide range of musical experiences the children are introduced to such concepts as duration, pitch, dynamics, tone colour and structure. To the person with no background in music, a list such as this may seem daunting. However, it is important to realise that the stress is on enjoyment through participation. Every child should benefit from a well-designed classroom music program.

At Home

- From the earliest age, encourage your children to 'make music' with simple instruments.
- Play records and tapes that the children enjoy. Try to have a variety — old-time children's favourites, some light classical pieces, some pop music.
- At all ages, encourage singing — everything from nursery rhymes to some of the latest songs that are learned at school or from radio or TV.
- Take advantage of whatever opportunities the school offers for your children to learn an instrument and encourage them to practise and perform.

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

At School

The Health and Physical Education program aims at helping children to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for healthy living, fitness and recreation.

It involves classroom lessons as well as a wide variety of regular outdoor activities. The children learn various physical skills; movement, dancing, gymnastics; athletics; swimming.

An increasing number of Australian schools provide a daily period of physical education which seeks to maintain a high level of fitness in all children.

Generally teachers are very aware of the great variation in levels of physical maturity and aptitude. Their programs are therefore designed to enable all youngsters to enjoy success and maintain a healthy view of themselves, their bodies and their abilities.

At Home

- Ensure that your children have a healthy diet. Discourage excessive reliance on 'fast foods' whose salt, sugar and fat content are high.
- Help them develop the habit of getting 'a good night's sleep' — at least 10 hours for young children, and 9 or 8 as they get older. This often requires strict control of TV watching.
- Encourage outdoor games and activities.
- Be conscious of your own importance as a model for your children. Ensure that your own lifestyle is healthy and health-giving.

QUESTIONS PARENTS OFTEN ASK

I get worried when my child brings work home that hasn't been corrected. How can people learn if their mistakes are not pointed out?

It is true that we can learn a lot from our mistakes. An over-emphasis on them can, however, be very damaging, destroying confidence and discouraging the sort of risk-taking that is essential if worthwhile learning is to occur.

Sometimes teachers will mark only a few mechanical errors in a child's writing, or if it is a first draft, none at all. This does not mean that correct usage is not being taught — rather that the teacher is concentrating at this stage on encouraging imaginative ideas or on remedying one or two errors, leaving others for another time.

What's happened to the regular testing — with marks and places in class — which we remember from school?

There is certainly much less testing going on these days in primary schools. Teachers are relying a lot more on their professional observations of the individual child's progress. They try to understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular pupils and use this understanding to plan future learning opportunities. All of this is best reported to parents in face-to-face interviews, where both educational partners can discuss how the individual child can be helped.

The old emphasis on tests with marks and percentages tended to trivialize learning and distort the teaching program. Most tests didn't really measure what they were supposed to anyway. After all, what could 70% in reading possibly mean?

Also, the testing ritual resulted in unfortunate comparisons and turned primary schooling into a race in which one child's success depended on whether he or she did better or worse than another.

Good teachers have always been able to tell us much more about a child's achievement than any test.

My six-year-old's teacher told a parents' meeting that the children are encouraged to invent their own spelling. This seems to me an extraordinary way of teaching them how to spell. Is there a sensible explanation?

This technique is not as strange as it may seem. Many teachers now encourage their young pupils to learn to spell through 'inventions'. From their earliest days at school, they are encouraged to put on paper any symbols that help them communicate. The very young child might simply scribble and then explain what he or she has 'written'. Later you might get a single letter representing a whole word; still later, the word might be represented by three or four letters.

The children write their own stories using their 'inventions' and the teacher often re-writes them in conventional spelling. The child-authored stories are frequently used as part of a pupil's reading material. They are supplemented with plenty of shared stories and a great deal of print on display around the classroom.

Far from allowing the children to become careless spellers and writers, this approach has a strong element of discipline. Children are gradually taught how to proofread their own work, identify and check doubtful spellings and prepare their stories for other readers. The 'inventions' are simply steps along the road to becoming a proficient speller.

Teachers around Australia are reporting great success with this approach, which links spelling, writing and reading. They are now supported by a strong base of excellent research.

How much homework should I expect to be set?

These days very little formal homework is given in the first three years of school. Later, teachers might set up to thirty minutes work for Grades 3 and 4 and up to an hour for Grades 5 and 6. This is not a rigid requirement, however, and many teachers prefer children to use their home study time in a more relaxed fashion — reading, pursuing hobbies, playing games and so on.

You can help by ensuring that your children have a quiet spot to work and by showing a real interest in what they are learning. If homework seems to be taking too much time, talk over the problem with the appropriate teacher. Sometimes particular children waste time because they lack organisational skills or the energy to get started.

Our child has been placed in a composite class. Does this arrangement put the children at a disadvantage?

It is important to remember that today *every* primary class is composite in that it has pupils of different abilities and different levels of achievement. Teachers have a variety of strategies, including grouping, for ensuring that every child can progress at his or her own rate.

It is frequently maintained that classes with children of different ages offer special advantages, encouraging a more co-operative atmosphere in which the children feel safe working at their own level.

As a parent, you should not hesitate to express any concerns to the teacher, who will explain how the program caters for all children.

I've been told that English grammar is not being taught in primary schools. Is this true?

Neither primary or secondary students receive a lot of instruction in identifying parts of speech or, for that matter, in parsing and analysing sentences. This is because over eighty years of research tells teachers that such activities do not improve pupils' ability to write clearly and correctly. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that when a significant amount of time is given to the study of formal grammar, independent of the writing process, the standard of composition actually declines.

This certainly does not mean that *correct use of language* is not being taught at school. Common sense dictates that it must be an essential component of any English program. It is best attended to, however, during the actual writing process — particularly when the children are being shown how to edit and revise their own work — rather than in separate fill-in-the-blanks exercises, or dummy-runs with sentences taken out of context.

The best way to improve the quality of written expression is for children to do a lot of writing (daily if possible), helped by a sympathetic teacher who is willing to give an honest response to the content as well as assistance with the more technical aspects.

The ideas in this PEN are developed further in Barry Dwyer's book, Primary School and Your Child *(OUP, 1984).*

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